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SUBJECT: SAADA, RECOVERING FROM EARLIER CONFLICTS, AWAITS
NEXT ROUND

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY. Ongoing tribal violence, a deteriorating humanitarian situation and increasing Houthi influence across Saada point to a likely renewal of hostilities in the near future, despite the ROYG's professed desire to avoid more fighting. Reconstruction and provision of basic services are the battered government's only hope of averting a sixth round of conflict. END SUMMARY.

HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

12. (S) Several factors, including ROYG security concerns, Houthi-controlled checkpoints and NGOs, self-imposed restrictions, combine to severely restrict movement in Saada. The government continues to prevent local and foreign journalists from covering Saada. NGOs report varying degrees of access, and none that PolOff spoke to had traveled north of Saada City since April. The UNHCR was unable to reach Saada City in November because the ROYG had closed the main road. Conversely, Islamic Relief Country Director Khalid al-Mulad told PolOff on December 14 that his organization has never had a problem with access, although he noted that his close personal relationships with ROYG officials might be a factor.

13. (S) UNHCR Country Representative Claire Bourgeois told PolOff on December 3, &I,m very worried about Saada. I am definitely more pessimistic than optimistic.8 She said that thousands of IDPs remain in Saada City, camping in tents and share-cropping on small plots of land. Refugee children show signs of chronic malnourishment and do not attend school, according to Bourgeois. The IDPs told the UNHCR they did not want to return to their villages because their homes were destroyed and they feared retribution from the Houthis, who accuse families who fled the fighting of being pro-government. Bourgeois said that the Houthis require all returnees to sign a document promising not to align themselves with the government. None of the refugees with whom the UNHCR spoke in early October planned to return to their villages, saying it was &too early.8 (Note: Khalid Al-Mulad of Islamic Relief told PolOff on December 14 that some &neutral8 and Houthi-affiliated persons had returned home since the end of fighting in July. End Note.)

HOUTHIS: STRONGER THAN EVER

14. (S) &You wouldn,t believe how much land the Houthis have in their hands right now,8 Majid Al-Fahed, executive director of a local democracy NGO and a native of Saada who visits the governorate every month, told PolOff on December 13. He said that the Houthis control access and security across almost the entire governorate. Islamic Relief,s al-Mulad confirmed that the Houthis dominate the southwestern region of Saada around Haydan and the territory north of Saada City. The group has checkpoints on roads throughout the governorate. As an example of the Houthis, relative strength over the ROYG in Saada, EmbOff learned that in mid-December the ROYG refused to provide the UN with an armed escort north of Amran. Presumably fearful of potential Houthi attacks, the government told the UN that its convoy could travel more

safely without the military escort.

15. (S) The Houthis have taken advantage of the poor economic situation to garner increased support among the population in Saada. Departing ICRC Head of Delegation Marcus Dolder told the DCM on December 16, &The Houthis offer a better alternative. They have made efforts to avoid corruption and provide health and education services.8 Ali Al-Khalwani, an English teacher in the Bani Moath district 20 kilometers north of Saada City, told Pol/E FSN on December 17 that he has noticed an increase in Houthi-affiliated tribes and added that the majority of students and teachers in his school publicly align themselves with the Houthis &because they want to be on the stronger side.8

16. (S) Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi and his followers have ramped up their anti-American, anti-Israeli rhetoric in recent months, including displaying banners and shouting slogans during celebrations for Eid al-Ghadeer (a Shiite holiday previously banned by the ROYG) in Saada City in mid-December. The movement has also focused on ROYG failings to rebuild Saada. In his inflammatory Eid al-Adha proclamation in early December, Abdulmalik al-Houthi stated, &This tyrant regime has not provided but destruction, devastation, rise in prices... looting of economic resources, killings, destroying ethics, eliminating principles, misleading, lying, and corruption in everything. For whose benefit is (the army) fighting and destroying?8

WAR OR PEACE?

17. (S) Based on meetings with ROYG officials and other sources, it is unlikely that the government will initiate the sixth round of fighting in Saada. Presidential advisor Dr. Abdul Karim al-Eryani, who represented the ROYG throughout the Qatari mediation in Saada, told the Ambassador on December 15 that the likelihood of a resumption of the conflict in the short term is low. Although an unconfirmed number of ROYG troops remain in the governorate, forces have withdrawn from much of the territory held at the time of the July ceasefire and ammunition is still in very short supply, according to Eryani. President Saleh's recent gestures, such as releasing captured fighters as part of the traditional Eid al-Adha prisoner release and naming Ministry of Defense (MOD) official Abdul Aziz al-Dhahab, a Sanhani with previous experience in Saada, as the new ROYG mediator, indicate Saleh's desire to avoid violent confrontation, Eryani said.

18. (S) Tribal conflict between Houthi- and government-affiliated tribes persists in Saada, with reports of sporadic, heavy fighting in early December. Several NGO sources worried that ongoing inter-tribal battles could ignite a larger conflict and draw in the government. In a December 13 meeting with the Ambassador, Minister of Interior Rashad al-Masri tried to downplay the fighting, calling the situation in Saada &very stable.8 He added, &The government is 100 percent no war, from today. If we had any intentions to begin (fighting) again, we would have done so before.8

19. (S) Multiple sources told PolOff that if the conflict starts up again, it will have less to do with Houthi ideology than with the humanitarian situation, which the populace blames on the ROYG. Al-Mulad of Islamic Relief told PolOff on December 14, &All of the government's promises to rebuild have fallen short, and (no resources are) penetrating past Saada City.8 With the collapse of the Qatari-brokered agreement, the significant investment incentives for Saada offered by the Government of Qatar (GOQ) never materialized. According to Al-Fahed, the NGO leader from Saada, and ICRC's Dolder, the only way for the ROYG to avoid future fighting is to demonstrate a genuine humanitarian concern by providing essential services and removing checkpoints on the main road into Saada that constrain the movement of goods and people.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) Saada remains of significant concern due to the current humanitarian situation and the prospect of hostilities resuming in the next six months. Until the ROYG begins to resolve the humanitarian crisis by devoting resources for the most basic services, the Houthis will continue to gain support on economic rather than ideological grounds. Ongoing conflicts between tribes functioning as surrogates for the Houthis and the ROYG only serve to exacerbate the already fragile situation. END COMMENT.

SECHE